DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 887 TM 016 473

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TITLE Implementing School Reform in Chicago: The System Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Control; *Decentralization; *Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Organizational Change; Principals; *Program Implementation; School Based Management; School Restructuring; Staff Development; *Systems Development
IDENTIFIERS *Chicago Public Schools IL

ABSTRACT

The implementation of educational reform in Chicago is discussed. Reform was initiated in Chicago to improve education for all children. A new governance structure is being created for the schools, based on the premise that schools should be under the firm direction of parents and that authority should be vested in the school community, rather than the central administration, which is being restructured. Implementation of the reforms began in 1989 with the election of local school councils. These councils have already begun to make decisions and have been very successful to date. The new leadership dynamic is changing the authority and accountability of principals. Changes in instruction are slower to appear, but some progress has been made, particularly in the adoption of uniform curriculum objectives. Incentives have been provided for further education for teachers, and staff development funds are being allocated to the schools rather than the central administration. Many problems, including legal challenges to the constitutionality of the local school council election process, face the reform effort, but the reform process has begun in a surprisingly smooth manner. (SLD)

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IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL REFORM IN CHICAGO:

THE SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

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Research, Evaluation and Planning
Chicago Public Schools

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association
Chicago
April 1991

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By now, it is likely that everyone working in education today in this country has heard about the school reform initiative in Chicago. Something dramatically different is occurring in the schools of this city, a bold and daring attempt to apply many of the recent ideas of education research in schools facing seeming intractable problems. The process of reform has begun; the schools, the administration and the board -- along with many constituent elements of the community -- have been implementing the Reform Act since mid-1989. Most of the major pieces are now in place, so it is appropriate to take a look at the first phase of reform.

For years, the quality of education in Chicago, as in most large cities, has been declining. By the time the Illinois legislature acted to pass the reform law, the signs of failure were evident. Three-quarters or more of the students were scoring below national norms on standardized tests. Most students entering high school were unprepared to do high school work: over 65 percent were failing at least one class each year; over 40 percent failed more than one class. Nearly half of the students dropped out of school before graduation, and many who did graduate were unqualified for entry level employment or for admission to college. In some high schools, barely 1 student in 5 graduated. Over half of the high schools in Chicago placed in the bottom one percent on the ACT examinations.

It was in response to these conditions -- as well as the persistent teacher strikes -- that reform was created in Chicago. The purpose of reform is to improve the education that each child receives. Specifically, more children are to perform above the norms; more children are to stay in school and graduate; more graduates are to be prepared for gainful employment or further education. Reform in Chicago is highly results-oriented; there are to be specific and measurable educational outcomes.

To achieve these outcomes, the Chicago School Reform Act created a new governance structure, based upon the premise that schools should be under the firm direction of those with the most vital interests at stake: the parents. By transferring authority in key areas away from the central administration and to the schools, and particularly the parents, the reform act gave the school community the power to decide on how best to meet the educational needs of its students.

This concept generates several critical issues that must be addressed if reform is to be more than simply a shift in governance. If there is to be substantial, widespread increases in student achievement, there must be specific improvements in: school leadership; instruction; teaching; and administrative support for the schools.

Before considering these issues, it may be useful to have a brief summary of the key features of reform. The Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 established a new structure for governing the nearly 600 schools in the city. Each school was to elect a Local School Council, made up of six parents (elected by parents), two community representatives (elected by community residents), two teachers (elected by the school staff), and the principal. This council was given certain broad powers within the school. Specifically, the council was empowered to approve the budget, evaluate and select the principal, make recommendations on textbook selection, advise the principal on discipline and attendance policies, and to evaluate the allocation of staff and make recommendations on appointments.

Each school is obliged to develop a three-year school improvement plan, designed to move the school forward toward achieving the educational outcomes specified in the reform act. This plan is to be developed

by the principal, hopefully with the participation of the staff, and approved by the Local School Council. The plan is to set a direction for the school, establishing priorities for the use of resources and establishing measurable objectives to be accomplished.

School principals in Chicago, who previously had had tenure in their positions, lost it. Instead, they were placed under performance contracts, normally for four years. They have been made accountable to their Local School Councils rather than to the school district's administration. Also, the principals have been given greater authority in selecting staff, in designing their school's curriculum and in using their funds. Of particular significance in regard to this last item is the dramatic increase in money available for the school to use at its own discretion. Funds generated through a weighting of the state formula for poverty are now to be distributed directly to the schools serving the children from low-income families. These funds are to be supplementary to the basic program of instruction; their use is to be determined by the principal and staff, subject to the approval of the Local School Council.

There are other new features in the reform act. Every school is to create a Professional Personnel Advisory Committee of teachers and other professional staff. Its function is to advise the principal and the Local School Council about educational matters. The 13-member school board was replaced, initially with a 7-member interim board appointed by the mayor, and then with a 15-member board appointed by the mayor from names submitted by a nominating commission. This commission was indirectly drawn from the Local School Councils. The roles of the board and of the superintendent were significantly restricted, to certain designated powers. The board has limited -- and largely indirect -- authority over the schools.

School Leadership

Implementation of reform began in Chicago essentially in the fall of 1989, with the election of the local school councils. Although there was much uncertainty and doubt about whether this first crucial step would be successful, the public response was positive. Over 17,000 people ran in the election, to fill 5,400 seats on councils. There were more than 300,000 votes cast, despite the fact that the election was not held in conjunction with a municipal or federal election. The community mobilized to support the elections. Businesses, civic and community groups, and school organizations committed time and resources to encouraging candidacies and getting out the vote. Their efforts, along with the hard work of many principals and other staff, made the elections a success.

Today, there are local school councils operating in every school in Chicago (excepting a few specialized facilities, such as Cook County Jail). These councils have organized themselves. They have sought out and received training. They have, by and large, made the decisions they were obliged to make, as well as they could. Councils were initially seated in November 1989. Within a very few months, they had to make several critical decisions. They had to approve a plan for spending the discretionary funds for the current school year; they had to evaluate their principal and - in half the schools - either decide to retain the principal for four years or select a new one; they had to review and approve a school improvement plan, which would determine the direction and resource allocation for the next three years; finally, they had to approve a school budget.

Naturally, problems were encountered in all these areas. Some councils had trouble getting organized. Many councils were frustrated by having to make crucial decisions so quickly. Few of the school improvement plans called for considerable change. A small number of principals were displaced, or nearly so, noisily. Overall, however, the local school councils were remarkably successful in carrying out their responsibilities. In the first year, the issue was not: how good are the decisions being made, but, are the

decisions being made? At the end of the first year of reform, it was apparent that the local school governance structured worked. The challenge in the next phase is to improve the quality of performance.

Efforts at improvement have been underway since the councils were elected, and continue today. Council members have received extensive training in educational theory, budgeting, staff evaluation and selection, planning, organization, communication and many other areas. Last May, the school board, in cooperation with the Illinois Association of School Boards and the National School Boards Association, conducted a two-day conference for all local school council members. Councils were also provided with a directory of resources outside the school system that they could draw upon.

School leadership is also undergoing change in the principalship. Of the 274 schools that were required to give four-year contracts to their principals, 112 (about 41 percent) have a new principal this year, compared to September 1989. All principals, new and old, have been experiencing profound changes in their jobs: new responsibilities, new authority, new kinds of accountability. A new leadership dynamic is being shaped in schools, as principals and councils try to work out the boundaries and processes for exercising power, and as teachers and other constituents of the school community seek meaningful roles in decision-making.

Instruction

Improvements in instruction are necessarily slower to appear. The current school year is only Year I of the schools' three-year improvement plans. However, some progress has been made. The school board adopted a set of uniform curriculum objectives and standards, which are consistent with the state-mandated learning objectives. The uniform curriculum objectives do not constitute a detailed curriculum; rather they define, in broad form, the kinds of learning that students are expected to acquire. This gives each school the opportunity to 'customize' the curriculum to meet the particular needs, the learning styles, or the cultural background of its students. Schools may also establish their own objectives, beyond those required by the state and the board.

Most schools have also formed Professional Personnel Advisory Committees, made up of teachers. These committees are charged with advising both the principal and the local school council on educational matters. The hallmark of the PPACs is diverseness. Some have three or four members; other include all the teachers. Some played a significant role in the development of the school improvement plans; others have had difficulty getting started. Again, at this early stage the important achievement is the creation of the committees, rather than their list of accomplishments.

Teachers

Perhaps no individual is as crucial to the success of education reform as the teacher. Changes in governance, in program and in administration count for less than what happens in the classroom between the teacher and the students. To improve the quality of teaching, the school board included new provisions in its employee contract designed to stimulate more teachers to take additional courses. The number of salary lanes were increased from four to six, making it easier for teachers to earn a raise by taking courses. As a further stimulus, teachers changing lanes will receive a $6,000 bonus.

These provisions are new this school year, so it is too early to assess their impact. Informal observations indicate a huge increase in the number of teachers enrolling in supplementary courses.

Research on staff development indicates that it is most effective when it is planned and directed locally. Schools can best assess their staff development needs, and teachers are more likely to 'buy into' activities which they have had a hand in shaping. To support this concept, staff development funds were allocated to the schools this year rather than being controlled centrally.

Administrative Support

Most of the controversy surrounding school reform in Chicago has been on the issue of the central administration. Critics -- and there are many -- have called for it to be reorganized, decentralized, streamlined, reduced, and even abolished.

The basic question in this area is, how can the administration be redirected from its previous role of control and authority into its new role of support and assistance? A subordinate question is, how does the administration become service-oriented and still exercise authority in certain specified areas: e.g., desegregation or special education?

The restructuring of the administration has begun. In the fall of 1989, the Interim Board moved to reduce the number of administrative units, redefine functions of units and simplify the administrative structure. With the arrival of a new superintendent, Ted D. Kimbrough, in January 1990, the process continued. He installed a new leadership team, with a new orientation toward service to schools. A Reform Implementation unit was created, to assist local school councils. The operational functions are being carefully scrutinized and altered. Program departments are reassessing their roles, focusing on the development of models and alternatives for schools to consider. Information offices -- such as Research, Evaluation and Planning -- are emphasizing the collection and analysis of data in ways that are useful to schools rather than simply to satisfy the requirements of funding agencies. Special education has been restructured and a long-range plan prepared, to ensure that children receive the services they need to obtain the education to which they are entitled.

There have been major accomplishments at the administrative level as well in the initial stages of implementation. The creation of uniform curriculum objectives and standards for all regular subject areas from kindergarten through grade 12 was mentioned earlier. Supplementing this is a new promotion policy, which encourages schools to look at multiple measures for assessing children. The district also prepared a Systemwide Reform Plan, setting general directions and specifying ways in which the administration would support the initiatives of the schools. Standardized testing was changed to use more current norms; results were reported in a new format that enabled schools to determine the progress they need to make. These steps have established clear and meaningful baseline data for assessing education achievements growing out of the reform efforts. A $400 M capital development program has been initiated, to build new schools and rehabilitate existing ones. This responds to a primary concern of local school councils: having adequate, functional facilities for learning.

The reform act imposed a dollar cap on administrative costs in Chicago, requiring that the non-instructional expenditures of the district be equal to or less than the statewide average. This requirement -- coupled with the higher cost of living in Chicago than in the downstate areas and with the greater range of services the district is obliged to provide -- has forced the school board to impose strict limits on administrative services. The implications of this are yet to be fully realized.

Initial Accomplishments

The first stage of reform implementation has not been without problems. The most frequent, naturally, has been confusion and misunderstanding. The reform act, like most such laws, is a sketch rather than a detailed design. The intent of specific provisions has been open to interpretation, and there has been no shortage of groups and individuals to provide interpretation. As more people become familiar with the reform plan, and as more precedents are worked out, the specifics of reform are being filled in. Meanings are emerging through experience and consensus.

Change, especially radical changes of the sort occurring in Chicago, is extremely unsettling. Some people have resisted the changes occurring, either because they genuinely believe the alterations to be not educationally sound, or because they have difficulty in abandoning settled ways of behaving. Such resistance to change, while it slows the process somewhat, can also further the reform program by encouraging continuing examination of the process and assumptions.

A third problem has been with the role of the principal. As noted earlier, principals lost tenure in their jobs, and inherited several added responsibilities. They also inherited a new decision-making process that -- whatever its advantages -- demands a significantly greater investment of time. Time has become the top concern of principals: there is not enough of it. Principals are, as a group, feeling greater pressure from reform than is any other major group. It was the principals who filed a lawsuit in state court challenging the constitutionality of the reform law.

This lawsuit fostered a fourth, and potentially most significant, problem in implementing reform. The Illinois Supreme Court this last December found that the election of the councils violated the rule of 'one man, one vote' and, because the councils were so central to the reform, declared the entire act to be unconstitutional. The state legislature moved quickly to ensure that the reform effort continued by establishing the legality of the current counsels and the school board. However, in the current legislative session, the reform act must be revised to cure the constitutional defect. In doing so, it is conceivable that many proposals will be put forward for other changes in the act. Thus, we do not know at this juncture exactly what modifications will have to be made in reform efforts next year. We face new council elections in October but will probably not know until the end of June exactly how councils are to be elected.

Despite these problems, on the whole reform is being implemented reasonably smoothly and swiftly. There are several accomplishments already that should be highlighted. For instance:

> The local governance structure has been established and is functioning moderately well. Without any models elsewhere in the country, a new form of school decision-making has been created and is beginning to take hold.
>
> New blood has been brought into education. In the council elections, most of the winners were people who had not been traditional leaders of their school communities. Parents have become more involved, community members show a greater interest in the school, the business community is playing a more active role in education.
>
> Decision-making throughout the school system has been opened up. Decisions that previously had been made by central administrative staff alone are now being made cooperatively, with principals, teachers, council

members and representatives from civic and community groups participating.

Cooperation is extending beyond decision-making. Former critics of the school system are working with schools and with administrative staff in all kinds of activities. A notable example is the Research Consortium formed to address the issue of assessing school reform. Its members include the Chicago Public Schools, universities in the area, civic groups, education advocacy groups, the state eduction agency, and others.

There is a new optimism about the schools: large numbers of people believe that reform can work, that the children of Chicago -- largely minority, largely poor -- can attain a quality education that will enable them to compete for jobs with their peers from more affluent communities. As parents come to believe in education, so will their children, who will be better motivated to succeed in school.

It must be borne in mind that reform implementation in Chicago is just beginning. Although the act speaks to achieving its outcome goals in five years, a more realistic view is that it will take five years to fully implement the new vision of education presented by the act. After five years, we hope to see some significant improvement on key indicators; after ten years, w look for substantial betterment of student outcome measures.

Further Implementation Issues

Meanwhile, in the next stage of implementation, there are some difficult issues to be addressed:

The role of teachers in the decision-making process needs to be enhanced. As the professionals directly involved in teaching children, their role in shaping the children's education needs to be strengthened.

The relationship between councils and principals need to be clarified. Models for effective working relationships must be identified and made available to schools.

The central administration's responsibility for oversight must be balanced with its new obligation to become service-oriented.

The issue of bottom up vs. top down has to be resolved. It is not always clear when district-wide policies should be established and when schools should be given autonomy. The issue is further complicated by a tendency of school staff and even non-staff to seek solutions from the top.

The informal organization of the school system needs to be rebuilt. All formal organizations have within them informal processes that develop to expedite matters. The reformed school system will still need these processes.

> The culture of the school system must be changed. It is not enough to put on a new hat or even an entire suit. Change must occur in the fundamental values which guide and direct individuals' work. This new ethic must emphasize the primacy of the child, and the primary role of the school community in shaping the child's education.

Conclusion

There are other large questions about reform that have yet to be answered. Answering them is outside the scope of this report, but they should be put forth:

> How is reform to be assessed, both formatively and summatively? What are the appropriate outcomes, and the most reliable (that is, predictive) indicators?
>
> How is the administration to monitor the progress of schools? Under what circumstances and in what manner is the administration to intervene in schools?
>
> How is the school board to ensure the performance of schools for which it is ultimately responsible but over which it exercises limited authority?

Based upon the performance to date, Chicago will find answers for these questions. The critics have been confounded; Chicago is ready for reform and has begun the process in a surprisingly smooth manner. Even the action of the Supreme Court has failed to derail or seriously impede the reform effort. Implementation will proceed; schools, working cooperatively, will begin to devise innovative and appropriate solutions to the educational needs of their children. Learning will improve, dropout rates will decline, test scores rise, graduation rates move upward and Chicago Public School graduates will be welcomed by employers and universities alike.

This, at least, is the intent of the reform movement, and it is the vision to which everyone working to implement reform is committed.